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ABSTRACT

School choice is an issue that has created much dissension among citizens, policy makers, and educators, with proponents on either side of the issue claiming a commitment to the improvement of education. Consequently, the teachers of the future are finding it necessary to clarify their own views regarding the choice controversy. The purposes of the present study were to investigate the viewpoint of teacher education students in a selected university regarding school choice, and to determine whether a set of attitudinal items regarding school choice could be useful in distinguishing these teacher education students as regards their attitudes toward school choice. A quantitative survey was distributed to 25 teacher education students at a comprehensive state university in the southern United States. The instrument requested responses to various topics such as the legal right of parents to choose, forms of choice which should exist, statements supporting choice, and statements opposing choice. Data were collected via a modified Q-sort strategy and results were subjected to Q-technique factor analysis. Results confirmed the existence of clusters of the respondents as distinguished by the four categories of items. Item factor scores indicated clusters which distinguish persons as those opposing school choice, and those supporting choice. (Contains 14 references.) (Author)

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AN ANALYSIS OF ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS TOWARD PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE

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Abstract

School choice is an issue that has created much dissension among citizens, policy makers, and educators, with proponents on either side of the issue claiming a commitment to the improvement of education. Consequently, the teachers of the future are finding it necessary to clarify their own views regarding the choice controversy.

The purposes of the present study were to investigate the viewpoints of teacher education students in a selected university regarding school choice, and to determine whether a set of attitudinal items regarding school choice could be useful in distinguishing these teacher education students as regards their attitudes toward school choice.

A quantitative survey was distributed to 25 teacher education students at a comprehensive state university in the southern United States. The instrument requested responses to various topics such as the legal right of parents to choose, forms of choice which should exist, statements supporting choice, and statements opposing choice. Data were collected via a modified Q-sort strategy and results were subjected to Q-technique factor analysis. Several factor solutions were attempted, with results confirming the existence of clusters of the respondents as distinguished by the four categories of items. Item factor scores indicated clusters which distinguish persons as those opposing school choice, and those supporting choice.

AN ANALYSIS OF ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS TOWARD PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE

During the last several years, the issue of educational choice has moved to the forefront of the national debate over reform and improvement of elementary and secondary education. The issue has been intensely discussed since the Bush administration began to actively seek enactment of choice programs. The United States Department of Education's choice initiatives in the proposed AMERICA 2000 Excellence in Education Act and the proposed "Federal Grants for State and Local 'GI Bills' for Children" embody these principles of religious neutrality and multiple options for participating students. Furthermore, influential educators and politicians have promoted parental vouchers that can be used for both public and private school selection as an integral part of the choice process, which has added new issues to the the debate.

Parental Choice

Choice can be defined as parental selection among free public schools. Choice programs in the United States range from a statewide interdistrict model like the one in Minnesota to choice within a district (intradistrict) in communities in several states, most notably Massachusetts and New Jersey. Choice programs are highly diverse in structure. Alternative schools, magnet schools, and open enrollment plans are all variations of parental choice schemes (Hess, 1991). By 1989, 23

states had either adopted or were considering some form of state planning for educational choice (Esposito, 1989). Forty states have at least one community with intradistrict choice. Among the most successful choice programs are the intradistrict models now in place in Montclair, New Jersey, and Cambridge, Massachusetts (Nathan, 1992).

The recent trend toward school choice undoubtedly stems from a number of causes, including continuing public dissatisfaction with the quality of public education and a willingness to try new approaches to resolving long-standing problems, especially in this time of national concern and growing pessimism about the state of the U.S. educational system (Corwin, 1992; Counts & Lavergneau, 1992). Some critics speculated that choice has been an easy cause to embrace for those policymakers who want to do something about education without paying more for it, particularly in difficult times when additional funds are hard to come by. In addition, the old coalition supporting choice -- conservatives, private schools, and their tuition-payers -- has been joined by some new voices. In addition, members of the business community, who have been asked to get more involved and to contribute more money for education, in exchange, have demanded more accountability from the schools. The free-market, open-competition orientation of these business leaders has made them a natural constituency for choice initiatives (Corwin, 1992).

Choice Debate

With growing support for choice in education, opponents of reform are stepping up their attacks on educational choice. According to Allen's study (1993), criticisms against choice constitute nine broad categories: (a) choice will destroy the American public school tradition; (b) choice will leave the poor behind in the worst schools; (c) parents will not be capable of choosing the right school for their children; (d) parents will use the wrong criteria in selecting schools for their children; (e) there will be insufficient help for students with special needs; (f) extremists will form schools; (g) choice is unconstitutional; (h) private schools are not sufficiently regulated; and (i) there are high hidden costs associated with school choice.

While many criticisms too often remain unanswered, the movement toward choice can be viewed from a positive point of view. In fact, choice is a great deal like electricity--it has to be used carefully, or it will create more problems than it solves (Nathan, 1992).

For Choice in Education

The movement toward choice is the first step in a movement toward getting the incentives right in education -- incentives for both the suppliers of educational services, that is, schools and their teachers, and for the consumers of education, that is, parents and children. Coleman (1992) has argued that the

incentives for schools that a voucher system would introduce would include an interest in attracting and keeping the best students they could. The incentives for parents and students would include the ability to get into schools they find attractive and to remain in those schools. However, under the current non-choice system, the results are unfortunate in several respects. For both the schools and the parents and children, an important incentive to improve is missing: The school cannot attract students by improving itself and cannot dismiss students who do not live up to its standards. Likewise, under the present system, students have no incentive to perform and behave well since students have little choice in selecting the school they aspire to.

The second consequence of choice in education is the potential for change in the stratification of schools. This stratification is currently based mainly on income and race. The result of choice in elementary and secondary education, whether confined to the public sector or including the private sector through vouchers, would not be to increase stratification; it would be to replace the current stratification based on income and race by a stratification based on students' performance and behavior (Allen, 1993; Nathan, 1992). Whilst numerous scholars inveigh against choice on grounds of "inequality" or "stratification," the absence of choice does not eliminate stratification. Coleman (1992) stated, "Families use whatever

resources they can to get a good education for their children. If they cannot use the performance and behavior of their children to do so, they use money or racial exclusion. Stratification among the elementary and high schools is not absent, just because 'choice' is not allowed" (p. 261). Thus choice is a tool to reduce the inequality. According to Nathan (1992), choice improves schools offering poor parents opportunity to find the best schools, and it can also help produce significant achievement and attitude gains for black and Hispanic students from low income groups.

In well-designed choice plans, educators benefit along with parents and students. They are given the time and freedom to create distinctive programs that they think make sense. Research shows much higher morale among educators who have been allowed to help create or work in public alternative schools than among educators in conventional programs (Glenn, 1992). The alternative school educators feel a sense of ownership and community. Their ideas are respected and they feel empowered. In many instances, as supporters of empowerment contend, parents also gain the self-confidence necessary to exercise control over their lives (Allen, 1993).

Furthermore, as cited by Nathan (1992), there are more than 120 studies showing that when families have the opportunity to select among different kinds of public schools, students' academic achievement improves, along with their attitudes.

Overall graduation rates have also improved. Studies have indicated that parents who were allowed to select among different schools are more involved, supportive, and satisfied.

As concluded by Lunenburg (1992), choice: (a) tailors options to the individual community and its needs, (b) expands the role of parents through the school selection process itself, (c) involves parents in policy-making and curriculum planning bodies, (d) expands the role of teachers as academic leaders, (e) results in the creation of smaller schools or of more personal learning environments, (f) opens greater opportunities for learning for at-risk students, and (g) facilitates the enrollment of students in colleges, universities, or vocational schools.

In short, school choice is an issue that has created much dissension among citizens, policy makers, and educators, with proponents on either side of the issue claiming a commitment to the improvement of education. Consequently, the teachers of the future are finding it necessary to clarify their own views regarding the choice controversy.

Methodology

The purposes of the present study were (a) to investigate the viewpoints of teacher education students regarding school choice, and (b) to determine whether a set of attitudinal items regarding school choice could be useful in distinguishing these teacher education students as regards their attitudes toward school choice.

In order to achieve these purposes, a 33-item instrument titled "Attitudes Toward Public School Choice" was developed. The items were developed based upon the research and professional literature on school choice. Several books and reference guides were utilized by the researcher to provide insight and suggestions for survey construction (Anderson, Ball, Murphy, & Associates, 1976; Berdie & Anderson, 1974; Blalock & Blalock, 1968; Miller, 1983; Tatsuoka & Silver, 1988).

The survey required reactions to statements regarding school choice. Statements were clustered into four categories: (a) legal right of parents to choose; (b) forms of school choice which should exist; (c) statements which reflected the literature supporting choice; and (d) statements which reflected the literature opposing choice. Questions relating to demographic information (gender, ethnic background, years of teaching experience, if any, and setting of last teaching experience) were also included. Items included in the survey are presented in the appendix.

The instrument was administered during a regular class session to 25 undergraduate students enrolled in a teacher education program at a comprehensive state university in the southern United States. To facilitate cross validation of the results, the students were randomly divided into two groups. The first group included 12 students while the second group included 13 students. No individual identifying information was collected

on the survey instruments, and the respondents' confidentiality was assured.

As described by Daniel and Ferrell (1991), Q-methodology generally involves printing each survey item separately on a three-by-five or similar-sized card. Respondents are asked to sort the cards into a series of piles (usually hierarchically arranged from left to right), with descriptive headings ranging from such extremes as "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" or "most like me" to "least like me" assigned to each pile. The researcher will then assign a value of "1" to items in the leftmost pile, a value of "2" to the items sorted into the next pile to the right, and so forth. This procedure, known as a "Q-sort," generally requires that a respondent place a relatively large number of cards into the piles nearer the middle of the continuum and an increasingly smaller number of cards in each pile toward the extremes. Hence, each respondent's ratings of the items will result in a quasi-normal distribution. An example of a Q-sort distribution of 33 items is presented in Figure 1.

Although there are definite strengths associated with the traditional Q-sort strategy, there are also a number of weaknesses. For example, the task of sorting an exact number of cards into the specified number of piles can become somewhat cumbersome and time-consuming, particularly if respondents are required to sort relatively large number of items. A more serious problem has to do with the limited amount of response

variance allowed by this method. By forcing respondents to place several cards in each pile, the researcher is requiring that the

Figure 1
Illustration of a Q-Sort Distribution

Strongly Disagree-						**Strongly Agree**
-	**-**	**-**	**-Neutral-**	**-**	**-**	**-**
2	4	6	9	6	4	2

respondents ignore actual differences that may exist in their feelings about items within each pile. Since Q-methodology is a factor analytic technique, and since such techniques capitalize on response variance, this problem may lead to distortion of true relationships that exist among people in a given sample. Hence, Thompson (1981) has proposed two alternative methods for collecting data for Q-methodology, namely, the "mediated-ranking strategy" and the "unnumbered graphic scale."

The present study utilized the "mediated-ranking strategy" for data collection. The mediated-ranking strategy requires that the respondent complete the traditional Q-sort, and then rank order the items within the several piles. The result is a completely rank-ordered set of n items that can each be assigned a unique rank ranging from "1" to "n." This method greatly increases the amount of response variance across a set of items, and may therefore produce a more highly reliable set of factors.

Once Q-factors are identified, the orientations of the persons within each factor can be determined by consulting the standardized regression factor scores for each of the items.

Since these factor scores are in the form of z-scores, the scores indicate the degree to which individuals within a given factor deviate from the mean response on a given item where these deviations help to differentiate the clusters of persons. Hence, for the purpose of identifying the attitudes toward school choice of the persons in each factor, only items with factor scores greater than |1.000| were examined.

Results

Data were analyzed separately for the two groups of teacher education students included in the sample using the SPSSx FACTOR procedure and a transposed data matrix (i.e., persons defined the columns, and items defined the rows). Factors were extracted using the principal components method, and results were rotated to the varimax criterion. Person factors were determined based on a minimum factor-structure coefficient criterion of |.40|. Resulting factor matrices are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Factor scores for the items across the two groups of teacher education student clusters are presented in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

Insert Tables 1-4 about here

Analysis of Factors Identified in the First Group Cohort

Eight of the 12 persons in the first group cohort were correlated highly with at least one of the two person factors,

and three persons had structure coefficients in excess of |.40| on both of the factors. As shown in Table 1, Factor I was most highly saturated with persons 2, 4, 7, 11, 12. An analysis of the scores for these persons on Factor I indicates that this group tended to rate items associated with parent rights and supporting school choice very highly. Consistent with their high ratings on this first group of items were their low ratings on items dealing with opposing choice. All these items can be categorized as a "system-wide orientation" to understanding school choice.

The second cluster of persons identified among the first group cohort (person 5, 9, and 10) was also distinguished by their ratings mostly on "system-wide orientation" items. High ratings were assigned to items relative to opposing school choice, i.e., choice is most often supported for non-educational reasons; destroys the public school system; causes handicapped, minority, and disruptive children to suffer educationally; creates unhealthy competition among schools; places low income and minority families at a disadvantage; and fosters scholastic or athletic elitism. On the other hand, low ratings were assigned to items dealing with supporting choice (i.e., choice will improve and revitalize schools, eliminate weak teachers and weak administrators, desegregate schools, and stimulate autonomy among schools). However, one "family/parent oriented" item (i.e., choice will make schools more sensitive to the concerns of

students and parents) was rated high in this group, while another system-wide oriented item (i.e., choice will foster inequality in schooling) was rated low.

Analysis of Factors Identified in the Second Group Cohort

As illustrated in Table 2, two factors of persons were recognized among those in the second group cohort. Of the 13 persons included in this cohort, 12 persons were identified with at least one of the two factors using a minimum factor structure saliency criterion of |.40|, with two persons correlating with both factors. Factor I was most highly saturated with 10 of these individuals (Persons 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25). This group seemed to be a "pro-choice" group and rated items associated with "family/parent orientation" highly. Among the items they rated most highly were those related to parent rights, forms of choice, equalizing education, meeting children's needs, student and parent concerns, and educational opportunities. Consistent with their high ratings on this second group of items were their low ratings on items dealing with opposing choice. Among the items this group gave lowest ratings were: choice will destroy the public school system; choice will cause handicapped, minority, and disruptive children to suffer educationally; choice will create unhealthy competition among schools; and choice will cause students who remain in their current school to suffer educationally.

The second cluster of persons identified among the second

group cohort (Persons 14, 18, 19, and 24) were most distinguished by their ratings mostly on "system-wide orientation" items. High ratings were identified to items associated with supporting school choice (i.e., equalizing education, meeting children's needs, improving and revitalizing schools, and expanding educational opportunities). On the other hand, low ratings were assigned to items suggesting opposition to school choice (i.e., causing race and class to impact upon educational decisions, causing handicapped, minority, and disruptive children to suffer educationally, fostering inequality in schooling, and creating transportation problems). This group may also be classified as a "pro-choice" group; however, interestingly, they rated the statement that choice will destroy the public school system high.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the viewpoints that teacher education students may have regarding school choice. The previous literature suggested that, with growing support for choice in education, opponents of reform are stepping up their attacks on school choice. The results of the present study suggest that the measurement of teacher attitudes can be achieved using continuously-scaled items and Q-methodology procedures. Four distinct clusters of individuals (person factors) were identified with using these procedures.

The first person factors identified across the two cohorts, as well Factor II within the second group were highly similar in

attitude and perceptions toward public school choice. These three clusters consisted of those individuals who valued school choice from "system-wide" and "family/parents" viewpoints. For example, most persons in these three groups support the statements such as: choice will assist in equalizing education; choice will allow children to attend a school that best meets their needs; choice will improve and revitalize schools; choice will make schools more sensitive to the concerns of students and parents; and choice should exist among public schools. These statements echoed some researchers' arguments in supporting school choice (Coleman, 1992; Glenn, 1992; and Nathan, 1992).

Factor II within the first group represented well the embodiment of people opposing school choice. It is worthy of note that this group was comprised of the two persons who have teaching experience of 3 and 6 years respectively. These results suggest that teacher education students with prior teaching experience may tend to perceive school choice in a more conservative way than their non-experienced peers. This group seemed to support some criticisms against choice which were cited by Allen (1993). Among these are: choice will destroy the public school system, choice will cause handicapped, minority, and disruptive children to suffer educationally, and choice will place low-income and minority families at a disadvantage regarding access to information on choice options.

In sum, it would appear that the instrument derived for use in the present study is effective in identifying teacher education students' attitudes and perceptions toward public school choice. The present study also presents evidence that Q-methodology is a useful way to develop dimensions necessary for understanding what draws individuals to support and oppose school choice.

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Table 1
Matrix of Q-Factors for the First Group Cohort

	FACTOR I	FACTOR II
PERSON1	.33398	-.39769
PERSON2	.76009*	.20627
PERSON3	-.37264	.35148
PERSON4	.73230*	-.23074
PERSON5	.26547	.76675*
PERSON6	.00350	.09099
PERSON7	.89230*	-.14406
PERSON8	.31683	.06784
PERSON9	-.26840	.65041*
PERSON10	.00062	.73308*
PERSON11	.72948*	-.24896
PERSON12	.78443*	.01092

* Factor structure coefficients > |.401|

Table 2
Matrix of Q-Factors for the Second Group Cohort

	FACTOR I	FACTOR II
PERSON13	.27288	.26915
PERSON14	.74021*	.44622*
PERSON15	.67638*	.30314
PERSON16	.71717*	-.02771
PERSON17	.69225*	.21663
PERSON18	.07307	-.40555*
PERSON19	.01009	-.85987*
PERSON20	.72165*	.19983
PERSON21	.63358*	-.23398
PERSON22	.78325*	-.00913
PERSON23	.61508*	.34405
PERSON24	.41677*	.57197*
PERSON25	-.62508*	.05356

* Factor structure coefficients > |.40|.

Table 3
Factor Scores for Items for First Group Sample

ITEMS	FSCORE1	FSCORE2
1	2.03988*	.43736
2	.83709	-.83059
3	-.05268	.13543
4	-.04964	.01051
5	-.55952	.20128
6	.13290	-.10508
7	1.42139*	-.55235
8	.86983	-.14459
9	-.43777	-.48522
10	1.93986*	-.12010
11	.43130	-.50316
12	1.00700*	-1.38579*
13	.49518	-.39781
14	-.98434	-1.14925*
15	-.99298	-2.09521*
16	1.48007*	1.54991*
17	.17891	.13941
18	.87623	-.60687
19	-.33682	-1.09824
20	.87289	-.65093
21	.23301	.32190
22	-.80610	.29389
23	-.49595	1.24161*
24	-.51519	.44950
25	-.50009	1.09804*
26	-1.42924*	1.27921*
27	-.08132	1.76170*
28	-1.51348*	-1.31754*
29	-1.66350*	1.80293*
30	.35943	1.94440*
31	-1.88980*	-.56597
32	-.15422	.31391
33	-.71235	-.97228

Table 4
Factor Scores for Items for Second Group Sample

ITEMS	FACTOR1	FACTOR2
1	1.40618*	-.38304
2	1.85096*	.22917
3	-.47741	-.15785
4	.34549	-.94456
5	-.35831	.24664
6	.65078	-.60657
7	-.12048	1.54809*
8	1.21516*	.47078
9	.87619	-.27557
10	1.58111*	1.20631*
11	.43876	-.50384
12	.62138	1.80266*
13	-.47180	.77809
14	-.35253	.62309
15	-.79127	.82797
16	1.22577*	.23243
17	-.16761	.36100
18	-.09280	.96426
19	-.20172	-.67391
20	1.19542*	1.36065*
21	.79642	-.30822
22	-.74223	-.19886
23	-.19950	-.51022
24	.37836	-2.02895
25	-2.13086*	1.06795*
26	-1.07515*	-1.56753*
27	-1.64861*	-.16166
28	-.81301	-1.70378*
29	-.86358	-.79513
30	.30014	-.49596
31	-2.04332*	.96794
32	.49299	-2.08383*
33	-.82494	.71246

Appendix
Items Included in the "Attitudes Toward Public School Choice" Survey

1. Parents should have the legal right to choose which school their child attends.
2. School choice should exist among public schools
3. School choice should exist among private nonsectarian schools
4. School choice should exist among parochial schools
5. School choice should exist among home education programs
6. School choice should exist among postsecondary schools
7. Choice will assist in equalizing education
8. Choice will improve student achievement
9. Choice will boost teacher professionalism and morale
10. Choice will allow children to attend a school that best meets their needs
11. Choice will allow for diversification of educational program
12. Choice will improve and revitalize schools
13. Choice will improve student attendance
14. Choice will eliminate weak teachers and weak administrators
15. Choice will assist in efforts to desegregate schools
16. Choice will make schools more sensitive to the concerns of students and parents
17. Choice will improve school discipline
18. Choice will make educators more accountable
19. Choice will stimulate autonomy among schools
20. Choice will expand educational opportunities for low and moderate income families
21. Choice will require effective leadership among school administrators
22. Choice will create financial burden on state taxpayers
23. Choice is most often supported for non-educational reasons
24. Choice will still cause race and class to impact upon educational decisions
25. Choice will destroy the public school system
26. Choice will cause handicapped, minority, and disruptive children to suffer educationally
27. Choice will create unhealthy competition among schools
28. Choice will foster inequality in schooling
29. Choice will place low income and minority families at a disadvantage regarding access to information on choice options
30. Choice will foster scholastic or athletic elitism
31. Choice will cause students who remain in their current school to suffer educationally
32. Choice will create problems regarding student transportation
33. Forcing poorer schools (educationally and economically) to close will not reform education